

Mithras, or ‘The Passion of the Bull-slayer’

Ted Kaizer

Few people have heard of Mithras today; certainly no-one worships him. But there was a time, some have argued, when it was an open question whether Mithraism or Christianity would prevail as the new religion of the Roman empire. From the late first century A.D. the cult of Mithras spread across the Roman world. The ‘fellow in the cap’, as he has been called with reference to his trademark Phrygian cap (resembling more than anything the headgear of the smurfs), was worshipped both in Italy itself and throughout the Roman empire. From Spain to Eastern Europe and from the north coast of Africa to Britain come thousands of inscriptions, reliefs, and frescoes created by adherents of the cult. The commonest among these Mithraic images is one which shows the god resting one knee on the back of a bull and thrusting a sacrificial knife into its neck. It seems that no Mithraic shrine could be without this dramatic and violent representation of bull-killing.

Mystery religions

‘Mithraism’ is usually classified as one of the so-called mystery religions in the Roman world (such as worship of Isis and Serapis, and of Cybele and Attis), a group of presumably similar movements which the individual could join by choice; an attraction was often the promise of a better lot in the after-life. The cult of Mithras certainly does not fit in with our general picture of what ‘traditional Roman religion’ was like. His worshippers in the Roman empire were organized in small and independent ‘cells’ and according to a strict hierarchy, reflected in seven grades of initiation (raven – bridegroom – soldier – lion – Persian – runner of the sun – father). They assembled in cave-like sanctuaries, either real caves or simulated ones such as vaulted basements, representing the universe. During their meetings the initiates reclined on stone benches surrounding the central aisle. They seem to have hoped to acquire salvation for their souls. But above all, the focus of their worship was a deity who was supposed to be an ancient Persian god.

The origins of ‘Mithra’

Despite the abundant archaeological remains, most things about Mithraism are controversial. Straightforward questions such as ‘who is Mithras?’, ‘what sort of cult is Mithraism?’, and ‘where does Mithraism originate?’ have received widely divergent and even completely opposite answers. The few ancient literary sources that make a brief reference to the cult were written by outsiders who had their own philosophical or polemical agendas. And on its own the visual material is, to say the least, difficult to interpret. Apart from mostly ambiguous inscriptions, no information from insiders has come down to us which could explain the workings of Mithraism unambiguously. Modern scholars have put forward extremely varied theories. Mithra as the name of a god is first attested in a document dating from the mid-second millennium B.C. Variably spelt, he appeared in the divine worlds of ancient East Turkey, North India, and espe-

cially Persia (nowadays Iran), especially as champion of contracts and as a manifestation of light at the break of day. According to one interpretation, the Roman cult of Mithras was a direct continuation of the worship of the Persian deity. On this view, the god had first found a place in Zoroastrianism, the early Persian religion built around the battle between good and evil. He came to occupy an ever more elevated place in Persian religion, and the dualism between light and darkness was carried over with him into the Roman period.

How Persian is the Persian god?

The theory that the cult of Mithras and its mysteries derived directly from Persia was generally accepted until about 30 years ago. When the assumptions it was based on finally started to be questioned, an academic storm broke loose. Some scholars even turned 180 degrees away from the old theory: they proposed to see Mithraism in the Roman period as a purely western invention, which had only the name of its deity in common with the ancient Iranian Mithra. According to this approach, the adherents of Roman Mithras chose to represent their new cult as foreign precisely in order to emphasize how remote it was from the traditional Roman forms of worship: the deep religious and spiritual commitment that it demanded was in strong contrast to the public and formal character of traditional Roman cult. The question then became when, where, and by whom the cult of Mithras was created. Again, conflicting hypotheses have been put forward. Some have drawn attention to the fact that the earliest cluster of sources for Mithraism seems to be concentrated in Rome and in Rome’s port of Ostia; others have stressed instead the more or less simultaneous appearance of archaeological remains of the cult throughout the empire. In direct contrast to the old theory, scholars have even postulated the creative role of a single historical figure, with sufficient knowledge of the ancient Persian world, in the process of setting up this new religion and thinking out its details.

Origins in the Near East, again?

Recently, an attempt was made to bridge the gap between the old notion that the cult of Mithras was an ancient Persian one taken over in the West, and the theory that it was a new cult conceived and designed in the West. It has been proposed that we should look for a community of founders, who spread over the whole Roman empire, but came from the East. Responsibility would lie with soldiers and ordinary citizens from Commagene, once a client-kingdom of Rome, situated in what is now Eastern Turkey. From the great monuments on Nemrud Dag and other hill tops in that region we know that Mithras played a role in the cult of themselves that the rulers of this kingdom fostered, at least up to the first century B.C. When the emperor Vespasian in the seventies of the first century A.D. annexed Commagene into the empire, its ruling family and other members of its upper class became Roman noblemen, and with them their former subjects could circulate around the empire more easily. This theory has great advantages. The annexation of the kingdom of Commagene occurred shortly before traces of the cult of Mithras start to mushroom throughout the Roman world. The cult seems to have spread widely right from the start, and this could only have been the case if it was, as has been said, ‘launched from a mobile platform’. It would also help to explain why Mithras was worshipped both by the military and by civilians.

Killing the bull – a star map?

Worshippers of Mithras came together in small cells, and each cell had a degree of autonomy hardly present in modern religion. There was no ‘Mithraic church’ in the sense of a separate insti-

tution with its own organization. Nonetheless, each group of adherents focused on the same central image, that of the bull-killing, which reached virtual canonical status. It is likely that the 'killing of the bull' stands for a transformation, from death to life: fertility symbols such as corn or grapes appear out of the bull's stabbed neck, and scorpions, snakes, and other animals accompany Mithras' exploit. The absence of a myth from Persia or elsewhere to connect the bull-killing with, however, has led scholars also to approach the central Mithraic image from a completely different viewpoint, namely as a 'star map'! It is clear that the zodiac and other astronomical symbolism had a prominent place in the imagery of Mithraism. To give an obvious example, the figure of the bull on the Mithras icon can be linked to the constellation Taurus (the Latin word for 'bull'). But some scholars have gone very far indeed in explaining the bull-killing reliefs as corresponding precisely to a complete set of patterns of the stars. One of the leading exponents of that school put forward the enchanting hypothesis that the origins of the Mithraic cult lay in a discovery made by an astronomer in the second century B.C.: the two periods of the year when night and day are of equal length occur earlier each year. As a consequence, over a very long period of time, the positions of the stars seem to change. As we know nowadays, this is because the rotation of the earth on its axis takes place with a slight wobble. But linked to the ancient belief that the earth itself was motionless, the only explanation could be that it was the entire universe that was moving. And how could that possibly happen? According to the theory that the 'star map' scholars put forward, the highly technical discovery made in the second century B.C. became the cornerstone of the religious doctrine of a new group that worshipped the only god who was powerful enough to move the universe: Mithras.

Whether the cult of Mithras ever was in a position to challenge Christianity and to become the western world's dominant religion is highly doubtful. It was not an exclusive religion, and its adherents could participate freely in other cults. Unlike Christianity, it lacked a unifying organization, a church. The fact that Mithraic scholars continue to disagree with each other on basic issues holds a warning that we should not too easily accept any definite, clear-cut explanation of the cult. Only one thing seems to be sure. If Mel Gibson were to make a movie out of it, the killing of the bull would be shown in gruesome detail.

Ted Kaizer is Lecturer in Roman Culture and History at the University of Durham. He likes the smurfs and does not understand astronomy.